PoL 14 Viets
(1490)

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SS
ACTION EA-20

INFO OCT-01 CIAE-00 DODE-00 PM-09 H-02 INR-08 L-04 NSAE-00
NSC-10 P-03 RSC-01 PRS-01 SS-20 USIA-12 IO-16 UPW-01
AID-28 RSR-01 /137 W
031381

R 241110Z JUL 71
FM AMEMBASSY SAIGON
TO SECSTATE WASHDC 7767
INFO AMEMBASSY BANGKOK
CINCPAC
USDEL FRANCE
AMEMBASSY KATHMANDU
AMEMBASSY PHNOM PENH
AMEMBASSY VIENTIANE
AMCONSUL DANANG

C O N F I D E N T I A L SAIGON 11729

DEPARTMENT OF STATE A/CDC/MR
REVIEWED BY Stan Lyden DATE 1/26/82
RDS☐or XD☐EXT. DATE
TS AUTH. REASON(S)
ENDORSE EXISTING MARKINGS ☐
DECLASSIFIED☑ RELEASABLE☑
RELEASE DENIED☐
PA or FOI EXEMPTIONS

SUBJECT: COMMENT ON THIEU'S CHOICE OF RUNNING MATES

REFS: A. SAIGON 11715 - PoL 14 Viets XR PoL 15 Viets
B. SAIGON A-9
C. FVS 26,23

1. PRESIDENT THIEU'S SELECTION OF SENATOR TRAN VAN HUONG AS HIS PRIME RUNNING MATE (REF A) CONFIRMS NUMEROUS REPORTS, ALTHOUGH THIEU'S PENCHANT FOR CONSIDERING ALTERNATIVES AT LENGTH AND SOMETIMES DOING THE UNEXPECTED KEPT THE SAIGON RUMOR MILLS WORKING.

2. ALTHOUGH THIEU AND HUONG HAVE HAD THEIR DIFFERENCES IN THE PAST, HUONG HAS EMPHASIZED IN OUR RECENT CONVERSATIONS WITH HIM HIS BASIC AGREEMENT WITH THE PRESIDENT ON ISSUES OF WAR AND PEACE. OTHER SOURCES HAVE TOLD US THAT DESPITE GENERAL MINH'S 1967 SUPPORT FOR HUONG'S PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDACY, HUONG HAS BEEN DISTRUBED OVER WHAT HE FEELS IS AN UNDUE PENCHANT FOR CONCILIATION IN MINH'S ATTITUDE TOWARDS THE COMMUNISTS, AND BY MINH'S REPUTED WEAKNESS AS A LEADER. ALSO, HUONG DOES NOT ADMIRE KY. WHILE HUONG CLEARLY HAS RESERVATIONS ABOUT THIEU, HE HAS TOLD US HE REGARDS HIM AS

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THE BEST AVAILABLE NATIONAL LEADER.

3. HUONG IS A SOUTHERNER AND A BUDDHIST AND HENCE PROVIDES REGIONAL AND RELIGIOUS BALANCE TO A TICKET HEADED BY CENTRAL VIETNAMESE CATHOLIC THIEU. HUONG IS HIGHLY RESPECTED FOR HIS PERSONAL INTEGRITY. HE HAS DEMONSTRATED ABILITY AS A VOTE GATHERER AMONG THE SAIGON VOTERS, WHERE THIEU IS PARTICULARLY WEAK. (ALTHOUGH AS TIME PASSES HUONG'S ATTRACTION TO YOUTH MAY HAVE FADED). SOME ASTUTE VIETNAMESE OBSERVERS HAVE NOTED THAT THIEU WOULD ESPECIALLY LIKE TO OBTAIN A MAJORITY IN SAIGON TO MAKE MORE CREDIBLE HIS EXPECTED MAJORITY IN THE COUNTRYSIDE.

4. HUONG'S HEALTH IS AN ACKNOWLEDGED DRAWBACK. ONE INTERPRETATION OF WHY THIEU HAD THE PROVISION FOR A SUPPLEMENTAL VICE PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATE INCLUDED IN THE ELECTION LAW IS THAT ALL ALONG THIEU HAD WANTED HUONG AND WAS CONCERNED THAT HUONG'S INFIRMITY MIGHT FORCE HIM TO DROP OUT BEFORE ELECTION DAY. (ANOTHER WIDELY ACCEPTED VIEW IS THAT THE PROVISION WAS INTENDED TO GUARD AGAINST A SITUATION IN WHICH KY WOULD RUN AGAIN WITH THIEU AND THEN DROP OUT AT THE LAST MINUTE, INVALIDATING THE THIEU TICKET.). IN OUR RECENT MEETINGS WITH HUONG HE DID NOT APPEAR VERY STRONG PHYSICALLY (HIS EYESIGHT REMAINS PARTICULARLY POOR) BUT HE IS PROBABLY CAPABLE OF STANDING AS A CANDIDATE AND OF FULFILLING THE LARGELY PRO-FORMA ROLE OF VICE PRESIDENT. AFTER HIS EXPERIENCE WITH KY, THIEU PROBABLY PREFERS IN ANY EVENT A LESS VIGOROUS PARTNER.

5. PRIME MINISTER TRAN THIEN KHIEM, SELECTED AS SUPPLEMENTARY RUNNING MATE, HAD OFTEN BEEN RUMORED AS A PRIME VICE PRESIDENTIAL CHOICE FOR THIEU, BUT IN VIEW OF HIS ADMINISTRATIVE ABILITY AND WILLINGNESS SO FAR TO SERVE THIEU LOYALLY, HIS PRESENT ROLE IS PROBABLY SEEN AS MORE PRODUCTIVE THAN THE LARGELY HONORARY POSITION OF VP. KHIEM HAS FEW POLITICAL ENEMIES, HAS MANY FRIENDS IN THE MILITARY ESTABLISHMENT, AND IS BOTH A POTENTIAL HEIR AND RIVAL TO THIEU. THIEU AND KHIEM ARE NOW FAIRLY CLOSE, ALTHOUGH KHIEM HAS AT TIMES REPORTEDLY RESENTED THIEU'S TREATMENT OF HIM. KHIEM IS A SOUTHERN BUDDHIST (HE HAS REPORTEDLY RECONVERTED BACK FROM HIS DIEM PERIOD CATHOLICISM) AND ADDS A SLIGHT ADDITIONAL DEGREE OF BALANCE TO THE TICKET. ALTHOUGH INCLUSION IN THIRD PLACE COULD BE REGARDED AS A SLIGHT, ON A TICKET WITH THE ELDERLY HUONG IN SECOND PLACE IT ACUTALLY IMPROVES KHIEM'S CHANCE FOR THE TOP SPOT FOUR YEARS FROM NOW. THE TICKET IS VULNERABLE TO CRITICISM ON THE BASIS THAT THE

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INDIVIDUAL HMEDING THE POSITIONS OF PRIME MINISTER AND MINISTER OF THE INTERIOR, WHO IS DIRECTLY RESPONSIBLE FOR ORGANIZING THE ELECTIONS, SHOULD NOT ALSO BE HIMSELF A CANDIDATE. (SENATOR HUYNH VAN CAO HAS ALREADY POINTED THIS OUT TO US.)
BERGER

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